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Reviving Theoretical Insurrection in Middle Grades Education

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The National Middle School Association (now the Association for Middle Level Education) was founded in 1973.

I was one year old.

Although it can be argued that all times, or eras, in history are important in their own unique way, it is important to recognize that the leading organization devoted to the education of young adolescents was launched on the heels of the civil rights movement of the 1960s – a time that *MSNBC* political commentator Chris Hayes (2012), in his book *Twilight of the Elites: America after Meritocracy*, has described as an *insurrectionist movement*. Insurrection can be defined as “the act or an instance of open revolt against civil authority...” (2011). And given the purpose, focus, aims, and magnitude of the civil rights movement, labeling it insurrectionist makes complete sense.

I have also wondered recently, to what degree, if at all, the middle grades movement can be read as insurrectionist in nature – and more importantly how it might be re-imagined as such in today’s socio-political contexts. Of course, I do not suggest that the middle grades movement is somehow comparable to the civil rights movement in importance and magnitude. However, I think an insurrectionist mindset of sorts could be useful today and I think particular actions from the early days of the middle grades movement could be read as revolts, of sorts, against the educational authorities of the times.

It was likely not very popular to state that young adolescence was such a unique developmental time in life that it called for an equally unique form of education. It is no small feat to have school systems all over the country, throughout the 1980s and 1990s in particular, take up the middle grades clarion call for developmentally responsive schools. To fundamentally change

grade configurations, teaching practices, curricula, home-school relationships, teaming structures, and master schedules is almost impossible to accomplish—especially on a large scale. To produce texts such as *This We Believe* (1982, 1992, 1995, 2003, 2010) by the National Middle School Association (NMSA), *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989), and *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) that are thoughtfully and thoroughly used by practicing teachers and school leaders, policymakers, teacher educators, and researchers for decades is equally impressive. These accomplishments, and numerous more, were made possible because of an organized, persistent, courageous, and passionate movement. Many young adolescents have benefited from it. I was one of them.

I started school in 1977 and graduated from high school in 1990. I taught throughout the mid- to late-1990s and became a middle grades administrator at the turn of the century. I witnessed firsthand, as a student and as an educator in Minnesota and New Jersey, the power and potential of this movement. As a teacher and administrator, I was fortunate enough to have experienced middle grades education as the leaders of this movement had intended. Their insurrection of the bifurcation between elementary and secondary schooling seemed mighty successful to me. I did not question its foundations, aims, or scope.

However, over the last 13 years in higher education (as doctoral student and faculty member), I have questioned the middle grades movement a bit – especially the foundational commitment to developmentalism and the missed opportunity to re-imagine itself contextually over time. I have wondered why there has not been a robust debate about the limits of developmentalism and an apparent lack of willingness to join others in similar fields, such as

early childhood education, to explore how critical and post-structural theories might help the field continually re-imagine itself in a new time and place – as the movement did so well over 40 years ago.

So, when Penny and James asked me to write an essay for the inaugural issue of this journal that: 1) advanced the call for a more diverse dialogue in the field of middle grades education; and 2) addressed the question, "Why do we need more provocative debate in the field of middle grades education?" I thought of Hayes' assessment of insurrectionist movements and began to wonder what it might be like to argue for some insurrection here, today, in how we theorize the foundation of middle grades education. I spend the rest of the essay articulating some ways I think we might be able to revive some insurrection. I begin by painting a brief (and bleak) contextual picture of educational policy today. I then articulate an opportunity the middle grades movement (we, me and you and others) missed over the past 20 years. I discuss some of the more recent questioning of the theoretical foundation of the middle grades movement others and I have done (e.g., Brown & Saltman, 2005; Lee & Vagle, 2010; Lesko, 2001, Vagle, 2012). Through this questioning, I do not intend to diminish the good things, mentioned above, that the middle grades movement has offered and accomplished. Rather, my aim is to look back and locate a missed opportunity for deeper insurrectionist work so that we do not continue to miss this opportunity.

Living in and Coming out of the Wake of the Fail Decade

Unfortunately, things have changed since the turn of the century. The standards movement of the 1980s and 1990s was hijacked by the accountability movement (Ravitch, 2010). Standardized tests went from being used for curricular planning and adjustments, to high stakes measures of student, teacher, principal, school, and school system success or failure (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Education has slowly and deliberately shifted from state purview to

federal purview under No Child Left Behind (2002) – and over at least the last 25 years neo-liberal economic principles have slowly and insidiously seeped into education, in the name of "reform." At the same time, the overall financial health of the country reached its lowest point since the Great Depression; the nation's income inequality is at its worst since World War II (Reardon, 2011); recent racial upheaval in Ferguson, Missouri has reminded us that explicit and institutionalized racism has by no means been eradicated as some would want us to believe; and I have just joined hundreds and hopefully thousands of teacher educators and researchers in signing a letter urging leaders to resist federal legislation that will allow the accountability movement to sink its teeth further into the hide of teacher education programs.

Hayes (2012) argues that 2000-2010 should be referred to as the *fail decade*. A time in which all major institutions that our country depends on to care for its citizens (e.g., government, education, big business, organized religion) has failed. He feels that in order to undo the damage of the fail decade we need another insurrectionist movement, much like the fight for civil rights in the 1960s. He thought the *Occupy Wall Street* movement had the makings of insurrection, but it did not quite take hold deeply enough. One of Hayes' observations of the Occupy movement was that it included all sorts of folks, across race, social class, and gender lines. He found the high numbers of college educated Millennials particularly intriguing, arguing that the fail decade had disproportionately affected Millennials. Hayes highlighted that at no other time in U.S. history had this many members of a generation done their part (i.e., worked hard to get a four-year degree), not had enough middle-class paying jobs available at the end of the credentialed rainbow, and been saddled with perhaps the highest student loan debt in history. In effect, throughout the fail decade, social institutions had not kept up their end of the *meritocratic promise*, hence the *America after Meritocracy* in Hayes' title.

At the end of Hayes' book, he suggests that perhaps it is these very Millennials who must lead a new insurrection. If one uses William Strauss and Neil Howe's (1992) estimation of who is in the Millennial generation, it would include anyone born between 1982 and 2004. This means that as an almost 43-year old Gen X-er, I am not included. It means that NMSA was founded nearly a decade before the first Millennials were even born. It means that a strong majority of school leaders, teacher educators, educational researchers, policymakers, and politicians are not included. It does mean that my youngest brother, now 31, represents the "old end" and two of my three children, nearly 15 and 10, represent the "young end."

If, for the sake of this argument, we accept Hayes' question to suggest: How might Baby Boomers and Gen. X middle grades researchers (those currently, and largely, in leadership) interested in theorizing and studying the education of young adolescents help set the stage for Millennials to lead an insurrection movement in the years to come?

I argue below that it:

- 1) involves looking back on the middle grades movement and making honest appraisal of a missed opportunity; and
- 2) draws on philosophies and theories that are less focused on what things ARE and more focused on how things might CONNECT and BECOME.

Critiquing Developmentalism—A Missed Opportunity

In 1994 (I was 22 and just starting my first year teaching), *Theory into Practice* published an important themed issue, *Rethinking Middle Grades* – guest edited by Nancy Lesko – in which contributors wrote convincingly about the need for a less prescriptive focus on developmental responsiveness that often (wittingly or unwittingly) positions young adolescents in deficit-oriented ways, in favor of a more particularized responsiveness that honors young

adolescents in the here and now and that begins to be more responsive, instead, for example, to the ethnic and cultural diversity (Gay, 1994) of young adolescents. At the same time, early childhood scholars were entering into a significant debate around the same issue¹.

For example, Mallory and New (1994) edited a book entitled *Diversity and Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Challenges for Early Childhood Education*. In it, Lubeck (1994) argues that cross-cultural research can be used to challenge the presumption that all children develop in the same way. Bloch, Tabachnick, and Espinosa-Dulanta (1994) take this a step further when asserting that concepts of developmental readiness and assessment are in and of themselves social constructions rather than "objective" entities. Later, with regard to the guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education, Lubeck (1998) asks leaders in the field to focus less on standards and more on conversations regarding the contextualized nature of practice over time.

The strong presence of developmentalist and critical perspectives continues today in early childhood education as there is, for example, an American Educational Research Association (AERA) Special Interest Group (SIG) dedicated to *Early Education and Child Development* and another dedicated to *Critical Perspectives on Early Childhood Education*. While there are AERA SIGs dedicated to *Adolescence and Youth Development* and *Middle-Level Education Research*, there is no SIG dedicated specifically to critical perspectives on young adolescence or middle grades education. And although the field of early childhood education has experienced a schism (Vagle & Parks, 2010) of sorts over this debate, the disagreements arguably have made for a healthy interchange of ideas around societal markers of difference such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and language. Unfortunately, two decades removed from publication of the *Rethinking Middle Grades* special issue, not

¹ The following two paragraphs are also present in *Not a Stage! A Critical Re-Conception of Young Adolescent Education* (Vagle, 2012).

much has changed in middle grades education. No substantive debate around our developmentalist foundation.

A missed opportunity. As mentioned prior, the far-reaching influence of the accountability movement (Ravitch, 2010) has further calcified the very normative educational policies and practices Lesko and others back in 1994 aimed to disrupt. Developmental responsiveness is still an (if not the most) important pillar of middle grades education (NMSA, 2010). And while being responsive to a developmental stage seems common-sensical, as Lesko and others have helped us think about, a developmental conception of growth and change can be read as “freezing” young adolescents in whatever characteristics are used to describe the developmental stage of young adolescence, unintentionally stripping them of the very agency advocates of developmental responsiveness desire.

I understand that it may feel dangerous, even blasphemous, to critique or question developmentalism as a theory of growth and change – as this theory has served as the very foundation of the middle grades movement for over 40 years. I realize it has been the primary rationale for the argument for a unique structure, curriculum, pedagogy, etc. However, just as anything over 40 years old, this theoretical foundation is susceptible to some down sides of aging as well.

It can become stiff and rigid.

It can become stuck in its ways.

It can become tired and less interested in change, even though the world around it is in upheaval and even though it can see the need for change.

It can become certain.

Re-Theorizing the Foundation Critically and Post-Structurally

Driven by these and other concerns over the aging of the theoretical foundation for middle grades

education, I authored and edited a book, *Not a Stage! A Critical Re-Conception of Young Adolescent Education* (Vagle, 2012). This book set out to respond to Lesko’s (2001) call for a contingent (profoundly contextual and dependent), recursive (occurring over and over again, in and over time) conception of growth and change (more fully described shortly). What resulted is what I would call a complicated text in which the matter of growth and change is not settled. In fact, contributors *de-stabilize* growth and change as something that is inextricably linked to the innumerable situations and micro-contexts that young adolescents experience. Or as renowned curriculum theorist Bill Pinar writes in his endorsement of the book, “Without repudiating developmentalism altogether, contributors to this landmark collection particularize it, in place (not always the US, as the final section makes explicit), as informing individuals who are also citizens-in-the-making, gendered, racialized, victims and beneficiaries of hierarchies of power.”

So one thing I think could help middle grades education in 2015 is to start to debate our theoretical foundation. I understand that folks have been writing about societal markers of difference in middle grades education. However, theoretically speaking, the foundation has not been substantively re-theorized (at least not critically or post-structurally), and if the foundation does not change then it is not likely that the field will be able to be as responsive to young adolescents as it can be. In other words, I am calling for the field to be less responsive to young adolescenCE as a development stage and more responsive to young adolescenTS as they move through the complicated, contextual, and socially constructed particulars of their lives. And I think there are at least two ways that critical and post-structural theories can be helpful:

1) *Learn about a contingent, recursive theoretical conception of growth and change and explore how critical theory runs through it.*

At the close of her powerful book, *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*, Nancy

Lesko (2001) calls for alternative (to developmentalism and socialization) conceptions of growth and change. She writes:

I think that if we assumed that growth and change are *contingent*, we would need to specify the contingencies and that would lead us to examine and document multiple microcontexts. I also think that a conception of growth and change as *recursive*, as occurring over and over as we move into new situations, would reorient us. Rather than the assumption of cumulative and one-way development that is now in place in both science and popular culture, a recursive view of growth and change directs us to look at local contexts and specific actions of young people, without the inherent evaluation of steps, stages, and socialization. (pp. 195-96)

Lesko's (2001) call here is based on a set of critical theoretical assumptions about knowledge production. First, she presses us to try to locate and then work to break from a dominant discourse, stage developmentalism in this case. This involves a careful examination of both the larger social matters that constrain some things and make other things possible. Second, such an approach requires that we actively and persistently seek to illuminate who ends up privileged and who ends up marginalized by the theories and practices we use. Third, and related, we must examine the social conditions that made (and continue to make) privilege and marginalization happen.

An example of one such social condition is the dominant "climb the ladder" upward mobility discourse², which constructs classist hierarchies in schools and classroom practice and is founded on misconceptions of work (e.g., Crawford, 2009, 2011; Rose, 2005), lived experiences of social class (e.g., Bourdieu, 1990; Sennett & Cobb, 1993), and the broader social and economic context of the US and the world (e.g., Berliner, 2006;

Condrón, 2011). Educators engaging upward mobility discourses without doing the work it takes to better understand what is informing those discourses – and the economic policies shaping workers' realities – may unwittingly alienate the very students they hope to inspire. This problem adversely affects student performance in classrooms as well, as social class is still the best predictor of educational engagement and achievement (e.g., Berliner, 2005; Rothstein, 2004) and the nation's *income* achievement gap between rich and poor children is the widest it has been in the past 50 years (Reardon, 2011) – amplifying an already alarming concern over the *racial* achievement gap.

2) Theorize young adolescent growth and change post-structurally.

In the time I have spent studying philosophers and theorists who are often described as *post-structural*, it has become clear that post-structuralism cannot be easily defined. However, I think drawing on the post-structural commitment to treating knowledge (things, ideas, concepts) as unstable, contextual, shifting, fleeting, partial, and always becoming is useful here. For instance, if we re-conceive young adolescent growth and change as shifting, partial, and contextual instead of as a stage or step, we might be able to literally "see" young adolescents differently.

Related – another possibility for conducting research related to young adolescent growth and change would be to turn to some of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) ideas. They ask that we enter the middle of things, not spend our energies trying to find origins and destinations. That things neither are nor are not – rather that things are always connected. When young adolescent growth and change is treated as the "thing" of concern, Deleuzoguattarian philosophies can help us begin to see that we might stop trying to conceive young adolescent growth and change as a structured stage that IS conceptually stable. Rather we might try to let go of the concept "developmental stage" and instead aim to enter the middle of deeply entangled contexts, where young adolescent

² This description of the upward mobility discourse is also present in an article (Jones & Vagle, 2013) that I have co-authored in *Educational Researcher*.

growth and change can be conceived as key spaces of production in which young adolescents' growth and change are consequentially marked, violated, disciplined AND celebrated, honored, and nurtured (Vagle, Dutro, Jones, Campano, & Ghiso, 2014).

Getting Back to our Insurrectionist Roots

As I have suggested throughout this essay, I think we find ourselves at a particularly challenging time socially, politically, economically, and educationally. I have experimented with the concept of insurrection throughout to suggest that tinkering around the edges of the issues, concerns, and problems we study in middle grades education will not be enough. There is too much at stake. Students graduating from public high schools today have experienced their entire K-12 education under the high stakes accountability regime. Standardized testing has become the norm and curricula have become increasingly narrowed.

The time could not be better for middle grades scholars to get back to our insurrectionist roots. And although I understand that some (perhaps many) of us might feel that beginning with an open interrogation of the developmentalist foundation of our field is problematic, I think it is worth it. I think the ensuing debate can be productive and generative. I think the launch of this journal is an incredibly important step in the right direction. I applaud Penny and James for creating this space and I am honored and humbled to be a part of it.

My dream is that 43 years from now (when I am, hopefully, 86), someone else (one year old right now) will be writing an essay like this, making insurrectionist arguments that are important at that time. And I hope her or his essay does not need to discuss insurrectionist moments that we Boomers, Gen X-ers, and Millennials have missed. Rather, I hope that essay is able to map complicated debates among all sorts of competing and complementary theoretical ideas. I hope that essay is able to critically explore the cacophony of

voices that this important journal, and others to come, welcome and foster – as the young adolescents for whom this field cares deeply will almost assuredly benefit. ❖

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